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ABSTRACT

As teachers gravitate more and more to the use of literature and strive to include a range of cultural experiences in their classrooms, the use of poetry from various cultural groups should be considered. Poetry is a very real means of having children see themselves and others as being both unique and yet the same. In considering poetry across cultures, African-American, Native American, Hispanic American, and Asian poetry can be selected and shared with children. To successfully share poetry across cultures, the classroom teacher must have access to a range of multicultural poetry and be knowledgeable of: (1) the role of the teacher in successful use of multicultural literature; (2) basic reasons for sharing poetry with children; (3) poetry preferences of children; and (4) themes and poetic forms unique to specific cultures and themes and poetic forms common to several cultures. Through multicultural poetry, children can see themselves and others in a new way. (Contains 28 references.) (RS)

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Multicultural Poetry:
Voices Unique, yet Universal

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Abstract

This article presents the use of multicultural poetry as a vehicle for learning about the essence of a culture, as well as learning about the many things that we all share.

Multicultural Poetry:
Voices Unique, yet Universal

As teachers gravitate more and more to the use of literature and strive to include a range of cultural experiences in their classrooms, the use of poetry from various cultural groups should be considered. Poetry is a very real means of having children see themselves and others as being both unique and yet the same. Hillman (1995) states that a poem can

> ... bring the reader new insight, a thought aptly expressed in poetic form. As Eve Merriam says, ... poems aren't "golden mysteries " but are written by people to express a thought, a feeling, or, sometimes just nonsense. (p.109)

Poets voice the needs of us all. A study of poetry from various cultures enables children to see the essence of a culture, as well as the many things that we share with others. One commonality is the oral tradition. Violet Harris (1993) states,

> ... that teachers ought to consider the oral tradition which is part of many cultures ... to make the oral literacy heritage and oral literature ... a part of the literature curriculum. (p.1)

In considering poetry across cultures, African-American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian poetry can be selected and shared with children. African-American poetry is a wise choice in introducing poetry reflective of various

cultures. In the introduction to the collection Pass It On: African-American Poetry for Children, Wade Hudson states,

> Poetry, I believe, holds a special place within African-American culture. It is an important part of an oral tradition that has been passed on by ancestors from Africa. Through this oral tradition, which also includes story-telling and music, history and traditions are kept alive. (p.5)

Pass It On: African-American Poetry for Children serves as an effective introduction to African-American poetry for children. The collection contains approximately twenty poems by fourteen Black poets, including such poets as Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes, and Nikki Giovanni.

The collection Make a Joyful Sound: Poems for Children by African-American Poets by Deborah Slier would also serve as an initial introduction to African-American poetry. It contains seventy-five poems by twenty-six poets, as well as information about the poets.

Children can become more familiar with specific African-American poets through the following books:

Nikki Giovanni

ego-tripping and other poems for young people
Spin a Soft Black Song

Eloise Greenfield

Daydreamers
Honey, I Love and Other Poems
Nathaniel Talking
Under the Sunday Tree

Joyce Carol Thomas

Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea

Walter Dean Myers

Brown Angels: An Album of Pictures and Verses

The ten poetry books mentioned above are varied, yet convey the African-American contribution to children's poetry and the range of African-American experiences.

Native American poetry emanates from oral tradition, as well. In the various Native American cultures, songs, chants, and poems are very important (Norton, 1995). Native Americans did not have a written language. They relied on their memory to preserve the important values of the culture. The spoken word was sacred as was the means by which Native Americans passed down stories, chants, and songs through generations (Sneve, 1989). Much Native American poetry expresses reverence for creation, nature, and beauty, as exemplified in such books as Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back, a collection of poems giving voice to the thirteen moons of the year and revealing the wonder of the seasons; On the Road to Stars: Native American Night Poems and Sleep Charms, created to lull listeners gently to sleep; and The Other Way to Listen, a poetic story that brings us close to the essence of the natural world.

In addition to more traditional Native American poetry, contemporary poetry can be shared with children as in

Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans. The poems and essays in this anthology, written by young Native Americans, speak of their identity, their families and communities, their histories and cultures, and the harsh realities of their lives. Many of the poems and essays were previously published in government publications. This book was designed to "set the record straight."

Hispanic poetry which can be shared with students includes Hispanic American poetry as exemplified by Gary Soto's Neighborhood Odes, a collection of poems about a Hispanic neighborhood. Soto's poems bring to life a Mexican-American neighborhood that is all neighborhoods. Other Hispanic poetry comes from Spanish speaking countries as exemplified by Arroz Con Leche: Popular Songs and Rhymes from Latin America. In a kaleidoscope of cheerful songs and rhymes from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Argentina, the oral tradition, too, is presented.

As is true of Hispanic American poetry, Asian poetry is not as readily available as African-American and Native American poetry. However, poetry from Asian countries is available to a certain extent and is valuable not only for exploring unique themes and themes common to other cultures, but also for studying varying poetic forms, e.g. tanka and haiku. Cricket Songs, for example, is a collection of Japanese haiku, centering around the small marvels of nature. Haiku consists of three lines, a five-syllable first

line, a seven-syllable second line, and a five-syllable third line. On the other hand, The Seasons of Time, a collection of ancient Japanese poetry dating as far back as the eighth century, includes almost exclusively tanka. Still the most popular form in modern Japanese poetry, tanka contains thirty-one syllables in five unrhymed lines, the first and third having five syllables each and the other lines seven syllables. Some of the anonymous poems in The Seasons of Time fall into the realm of folk songs, handed down orally from one generation to the next (Baron, 1968). The leading contemporary Japanese poet Mado also expresses the joys of the natural world, but through the eyes of a child in The Animals: Selected Poems.

In order to successfully share poetry across cultures, the classroom teacher must not only have access to range of multicultural poetry as described above but should be knowledgeable of (1) the role of the teacher in successful use of multicultural literature, (2) basic reasons for sharing poetry with children, (3) poetry preferences of children, and (4) themes and poetic forms unique to specific cultures and themes and poetic forms common to several cultures.

In regard to the teacher's role in successful use of multicultural literature, Violet Harris notes,

> The successful use of multicultural texts and stories with children depends on the multi-

> cultural awareness and understanding of the teacher and the classroom environment he/she promotes during and beyond the sharing of literature. (p. 235)

This stance is echoed by Abt-Perkins and Gomez (1993) in their article about teacher examination of personal perspectives (fundamental values, attitudes, disposition and belief systems).

> In reflecting on these, we gain a clearer picture of how our race, social class, ethnicity, and other characteristics, such as our language background and gender shape our teaching and the opportunities for diverse students' learning and achievement. (p. 193)

The authors suggest that teaching multiculturally must begin with self-inquiry and that teacher self-inquiry leads to environments that enhance literacy learning of children in the classroom.

A second premise to successful sharing of multicultural poetry deals with rationale - reasons for sharing poetry with children. In a 1980 address at a regional International Reading Association meeting, Jean Le Pere identified six reasons for sharing poetry with children. Among those reasons are three which have a direct bearing on the rationale for sharing multicultural poetry: (1) having children identify with people and situations, (2) expressing moods familiar to children and helping children understand and accept their feelings, and (3) granting children insight

into themselves and others, developing their sensitivity to universal needs and feelings.

Not only a firm grasp of the rationale for poetry sharing is needed, but also awareness of children's poetry preferences is needed for a successful multicultural poetry program. Poetry preferences of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, for example, include (1) contemporary poetry, (2) poetry dealing with familiar and enjoyable experiences, (3) poetry with rhythm and rhyme, and (4) humorous poetry (Terry, 1974). The more recent study of poetry preferences by Kutiper and Wilson (1993) supports Terry's findings.

In reading and sharing poetry from each of the four cultural groups, children can be lead to detect themes specific to each culture and themes common to several. Poetic form, too, can be noted. After reading, for example, the poetry of Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Giovanni, Joyce Thomas, and Walter Dean Myers, children will detect the oral tradition and the pride of heritage, and they will absorb a strong sense of African-American experiences. In reading Native American poetry, children will become aware of that culture's reverence for nature. A similar awareness will be instilled as children read and share Asian poetry, so much of it in the form of tanka and haiku. In reading Gary Soto's Neighborhood Odes, poems paying homage to the simplicity and enjoyment of everyday life, children will experience the essence of growing up Latino

and will be exposed to various Spanish words since Soto intertwines various Spanish words and phrases.

In addition to enabling children to see the essence of each culture, poetry across cultures presents children with the opportunity of realizing how much is shared. In reflecting on the poetry of the four cultural groups, (1) familiar experiences and (2) moods and feelings are common themes readily apparent and themes that parallel the interests of children. Children can select poems about familiar experiences and can reflect on how their own experiences parallel those of the poet. Gary Soto's "Ode to Weddings" and Eloise Greenfield's "Wedding Day" express an experience familiar and memorable to many children. An even simpler experience, kite flying, is expressed in " Flying Kites" by Quincy Troupe (Slier, 1991) and in the following from Cricket Songs (Behn, 1964).

> What a pretty kite
> the beggar's children fly high
> above their hovel!
>
> ISSA (p. 49)

Children may also reflect on the fact that familiar experiences are not only expressed across cultures, but also across time.

This, too, is evident in poems about sleep. On the Road of Stars: Native American Night Poems and Sleep Charms contains verses from over 20 Native American tribes. From

the Yuma comes the following:

Sleep Song

Sleep, Sleep,
It will carry you into the land of wonderful dreams
In those dreams you will see
a future day and your future family. (p. 14)

The modern Japanese poet Mado (1992) writes

SLEEP

At night
When quietly
The two tiny windows of my body
Lower their blinds.

The two tiny windows
Of all creatures of all kinds,
Living in the sky,
The sea, and on land,
Quietly
Lower their blinds too.

So as not to cause
A single dream

To be mixed
With another. (p. 35)

Poems that suggest moods and feelings familiar to children are evident, too, across cultures. Sneve's collection of Native American poetry reflecting the theme of youth includes, for instance, "I Watched an Eagle Soar" and "Farewell, My Younger Brother," each expressing opposite ends of the spectrum of feelings: elation and resignation. Even more thoughtful and somber feelings are expressed in Nathaniel Talking; "Missing Mama" expresses the hurt and

loss resulting from the death of a parent, and "Weights" expresses a child's concern for the troubles of another.

Finally, children can be guided into developing sensitivity to universal needs and feelings through multicultural poetry. Countee Cullen's poem "Incident" (Hudson, 1993) exemplifies the universal need for acceptance and the harmful effects of prejudice. In Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea, Joyce Carol Thomas celebrates individuality and voices the universal need to be loved

Cherish Me

I sprang from Mother Earth
She clothed me in her own colors
I was nourished by father sun
He glazed the pottery of my skin
I am beautiful by design
The pattern of night in my hair
The pattern of music in my rhythm
As you would cherish a thing of beauty
Cherish me (p. 1)

In reading and sharing poems like these, the teacher of multicultural poetry can help children understand that people of various cultures are more the same than different. The teacher can help children see themselves in others. Bieger (1995/1996) states, "Each time we read a good piece of literature, we are changed by the experience; we see the world in a new way." (p. 311) Through multicultural poetry, children can see themselves and others in a new way.

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